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D E A T H:

A

P O E T I C A L E S S A Y.

By BEILBY PORTEUS, M.A.
Fellow of *Christ's* College.

THE THIRD EDITION.

CAMBRIDGE,

Printed by J. BENTHAM Printer to the UNIVERSITY, for T. & J. MERRILL,
Bookfellers at Cambridge; Sold by BENJ. DOD, J. WHISTON & B. WHITE,
R. & J. DODSLEY, and T. POTE, in London; J. POTE at Eton; J. FLETCHER,
and D. PRINCE, in Oxford; and S. STABLER at York.

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ANNUNZIO PER VINI
SARDEGNA S.p.A.

A Clause of Mr. SEATON's Will.
Dated Oct. 8. 1738.

I Give my Kissingbury Estate to the University of Cambridge for ever: the Rents of which shall be disposed of yearly by the Vice-Chancellor for the time being, as he the Vice-Chancellor, the Master of Clare Hall, and the Greek Professor for the time being, or any two of them shall agree. Which three persons aforesaid shall give out a Subject, which Subject shall for the first Year be one or other of the Perfections or Attributes of the Supreme Being, and so the succeeding Years, till the Subject is exhausted; and afterwards the Subject shall be either Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell, Purity of Heart, &c. or whatever else may be judged by the Vice-Chancellor, Master of Clare Hall, and Greek Professor, to be most conducive to the Honour of the Supreme Being and Recommendation of Virtue. And they shall yearly dispose of the Rent of the above Estate to that Master of Arts, whose Poem on the Subject given shall be best approved by them. Which Poem I ordain to be always in English, and to be printed; the expence of which shall be deducted out of the product of the Estate, and the residue given as a reward for the Composer of the Poem, or Ode, or Copy of Verses.

WE the underwritten, do assign Mr. SEATON's Reward to Mr. PORTEUS, M.A. for his Poem on DEATH; and direct the said Poem to be printed, according to the tenor of the Will.

Oct. 8. 1759.

L. Caryl Vice-Chancellor.
J. Wilcox Master of Clare Hall.
M. Lort Greek Professor.

D E A T H:

A

P O E T I C A L E S S A Y.

FRRIEND to the wretch, whom every friend forsakes,
I woo thee, DEATH! In Fancy's fairy paths
Let the gay Songster rove, and gently trill
The strain of empty joy. — Life and its joys
I leave to those that prize them. — At this hour,
This solemn hour, when Silence rules the world,
And wearied Nature makes a gen'ral pause,
Wrapt in Night's fable robe, through cloysters drear
And charnels pale, tenanted by a throng
Of meagre phantoms shooting crosses my path
With silent glance, I seek the shadowy vale
Of DEATH. — Deep in a murky cave's recess

Lav'd

Lav'd by Oblivion's listless ſteam, and fenc'd
 By ſhelving rocks and intermingled horrors
 Of yew' and cyprefs' ſhade from all intrusion
 Of buſy noontide-beam, the MONARCH ſits
 In unſubſtantial Maſteſty enthron'd.
 At his right hand, neareſt himſelf in place
 And frightfulneſs of form, his Parent SIN
 With fatal induſtry and cruel care
 Buſies herſelf in pointing all his ſtings,
 And tipping every ſhaft with venom drawn
 From her infernal ſtore: around him rang'd
 In terrible array and ſtrange diverſity
 Of uncouth ſhapes, ſtand his dread Miniſters:
 Foremoſt Old Age, his natural ally
 And firmeſt friend: next him diſeaſes thick,
 A motley train; Fever with cheek of fire;
 Conſumption wan; Palfy, half warm with life,
 And half a clay-cold lump; joint-tort'ring Gout,
 And ever-gnawing Rheum; Convulſion wild;
 Swol'n Dropſy; panting Aſthma; Apoplex
 Full-gorg'd. — There too the Peſtilence that walks
 In darkneſs, and the Sickneſs that deſtroys

A POETICAL ESSAY.

At broad noon-day. — These, and a thousand more,
Horrid to tell, attentive wait; and, when
By Heaven's command DEATH waves his ebon wand,
Sudden rush forth to execute his purpose,
And scatter desolation o'er the Earth.

Ill-fated Man, for whom such various forms
Of Mis'ry wait, and mark their future prey!
Ah! why, ALL-RIGHTEOUS FATHER, didst thou make
This Creature Man? why wake th' unconscious dust
To life and wretchedness? O better far
Still had he slept in uncreated night,
If this the Lot of being! — Was it for this
Thy breath divine kindled within his breast
The vital flame? For this, was thy fair image
Stamp'd on his soul in godlike lineaments?
For this, dominion giv'n him absolute
O'er all thy works, only that he might reign
Supreme in woe? — From the blest Source of Good
Could Pain and Death proceed? Could such foul Ills
Fall from fair Mercy's hands? — Far be the thought,
The impious thought! God never made a creature
But what was good. — HE made *a living Soul*:

The

The wretched Mortal was the Work of MAN.
 Forth from his Maker's hands he sprung to life,
 Fresh with immortal bloom; No pain he knew,
 No fear of Death, no check to his desires
 Save one command.—That one command, (which stood
 'Twixt him and Death, the test of his obedience,)
 Urg'd on by wanton curiosity,
 He broke. — There in one moment was undone
 The fairest of God's works. — The same rash hand,
 That pluck'd in evil hour the fatal fruit,
 Unbarr'd the gates of Hell, and let loose Sin,
 And Death, and all the family of Pain,
 To prey upon Mankind. — Young Nature saw
 The monstrous crew, and shook thro' all her frame.
 Then fled her new-born lustre, then began
 Heav'ns chearful face to low'r, then vapours choak'd
 The troubled air, and form'd a veil of clouds
 To hide the willing Sun. — The Earth convuls'd
 With painful throes threw forth a bristly crop
 Of thorns and briars; and Insect, Bird, and Beast,
 That wont before with admiration fond
 To gaze at Man, and fearless croud around him,

Now

Now fled before his face, shunning in haste
 Th' infection of his misery. — He alone,
 Who justly might, th' offended Lord of Man,
 Turn'd not away his face, he full of pity
 Forfook not in this uttermost distress
 His best-lov'd work. — That comfort still remain'd,
 (That best that greatest comfort in affliction)
 The countenance of God, and thro' the gloom
 Shot forth some kindly gleams, to chear and warm
 Th' offender's sinking soul. — Hope sent from Heav'n
 Uprais'd his drooping head, and shew'd afar
 A happier scene of things; the PROMIS'D SEED
 Trampling upon the SERPENT's humbled crest,
 DEATH of his sting disarm'd, and the dank grave
 Made pervious to the realms of endless day,
 No more the limit but the gate of life.

Chear'd with the view, MAN went to till the ground
 From whence he rose; sentenc'd indeed to toil
 As to a punishment, yet (ev'n in wrath
 So merciful is Heav'n) this toil became
 The solace of his woes, the sweet employ
 Of many a live-long hour, and surest guard

Against disease and Death. — DEATH, tho' denounc'd
 Was yet a distant Ill, by feeble arm
 Of Age, his sole support, led slowly on.
 Not then, as since, the short-liv'd sons of men
 Flock'd to his realms in countless multitudes;
 Scarce in the course of twice five hundred years
 One solitary ghost went shiv'ring down
 To his unpeopled shore; — In sober state,
 Through the sequester'd vale of rural life,
 The venerable PATRIARCH guileless held
 The tenor of his way; Labour prepar'd
 His simple fare, and Temp'rance rul'd his board.
 Tir'd with his daily toil, at early eve
 He sunk to sudden rest; gentle and pure
 As breath of evening Zephyr and as sweet
 Were all his slumbers; with the Sun he rose,
 Alert and vigorous as He, to run
 His destin'd course.—Thus nerv'd with Giant Strength
 He stem'd the tide of time, and stood the shock
 Of ages rolling harmless ov'r his head.
 At life's meridian point arriv'd, he stood,
 And looking round saw all the vallies fill'd

With

With nations from his loins; full-well content
To leave his race thus scatter'd o'er the Earth,
Along the gentle slope of life's decline
He bent his gradual way, till full of years
He dropt like mellow fruit into his grave.

Such in the infancy of Time was Man,
So calm was life, so impotent was DEATH.
O had he but preserv'd these few remains
These shatter'd fragments of lost happiness
Snatch'd by the hand of heav'n from the sad wreck
Of innocence primæval; still had he liv'd
Great ev'n in ruin, tho' fall'n, yet not forlorn,
Though mortal, yet not every where beset
With Death in every shape! But He, impatient
To be compleatly wretched, hastes to fill up
The measure of his woes. — 'Twas Man himself
Brought Death into the world, And Man himself
Gave keenness to his darts, quicken'd his pace,
And multiply'd destruction on mankind.

First Envy, Eldest-Born of Hell, embrued
Her hands in blood, and taught the Sons of Men
To make a Death which Nature never made,

And God abhorr'd, with violence rude to break
The thread of life ere half its length was run,
And rob a wretched brother of his being.
With joy Ambition saw, and soon improv'd
The execrable deed. — 'Twas not enough
By subtle fraud to snatch a single life,
Puny impiety ! whole kingdoms fell
To fate the lust of power ; more horrid still,
The foulest stain and scandal of our nature
Becamè its boast. — *One* Murder made a Villain,
Millions a Hero. — Princes were privileg'd
To kill, and numbers sanctified the crime.
Ah ! why will Kings forget that they are Men ?
And Men that they are brethren ? Why delight
In human sacrifice ? Why burst the ties
Of Nature, that should knit their souls together
In one soft bond of amity and love ?
Yet still they breathe destruction, still go on
Inhumanly ingenious to find out
New pains for life, new terrors for the grave,
Artificers of Death ! Still Monarchs dream
Of universal Empire growing up

From univerfal ruin. — Blaft the defign
GREAT GOD OF HOSTS, nor let thy creatures fall
Unpitied victims at Ambition's fhine!

Yet fay, fhould Tyrants learn at laft to feel,
And the loud din of battle ceafe to bray;
Should dove-ey'd Peace o'er all the earth extend
Her olive branch, and give the world refofe,
Would Death be foil'd? Would health, and ftrength,
and youth

Defy his power? Has he no arts in ftore,
No other shafts fave thofe of war? — Alas!
Ev'n in the fmile of Peace, that fmile which fheds
A heav'nly funfhine o'er the foul, there basks
That ferpent Luxury: War its thoufands flays,
Peace its ten thoufands: In th' embattled plain
Tho' Death exults, and claps his raven wings,
Yet reigns he not ev'n there fo abfolute,
So mercilefs, as in yon frantic fcenes
Of midnight revel and tumultuous mirth,
Where, in th' intoxicating draught conceal'd,
Or couch'd beneath the glance of lawlefs Love,
He fnares the fimple youth, who nought fufpecting
Means to be bleft; — But finds himfelf undone.

Down the smooth stream of life the Stripling darts
 Gay as the morn; bright glows the vernal sky,
 Hope swells his sails, and Passion steers his course;
 Safe glides his little bark along the shore
 Where Virtue takes her stand, but if too far
 He launches forth beyond Discretion's mark,
 Sudden the tempest scowls, the furies roar,
 Blot his fair day, and plunge him in the deep.

O sad but sure mischance! O happier far
 To lie like gallant HOWE midst Indian wilds
 A breathless corse, cut off by savage hands
 In earliest prime, a generous sacrifice
 To freedom's holy cause; than so to fall
 Torn immature from life's meridian joys,
 A prey to Vice, Intemperance, and Disease.

Yet die ev'n thus, thus rather perish still,
 Ye Sons of Pleasure, by th' Almighty strick'n,
 Than ever dare (though oft, alas! ye dare)
 To lift against yourselves the murd'rous steel,
 To wrest from GOD's own hand the sword of Justice
 And be your own avengers. — Hold rash Man,
 Though with anticipating speed thou'lt rang'd
 Through

Through every region of delight, nor left
One joy to gild the evening of thy days,
Though life seem one uncomfortable void,
Guilt at thy heels, before thy face despair,
Yet gay this scene, and light this load of woe
Compar'd with thy hereafter. — Think, O think,
And e'er thou plunge into the vast abyss,
Pause on the verge awhile, look down and see
Thy future mansion. — Why that start of horror?
From thy slack hand why drops th' uplifted steel?
Didst thou not think such vengeance must await
The wretch, that with his crimes all fresh about him
Rushes irreverent, unprepar'd, uncall'd,
Into his Maker's presence, throwing back
With insolent disdain his choicest gift?

Live then, while Heav'n in pity lends thee life,
And think it all too short to wash away
By penitential tears and deep contrition
The scarlet of thy crimes. — So shalt thou find
Rest to thy soul, so unappall'd shalt meet
Death when he comes, not wantonly invite
His ling'ring stroke. — Be it thy sole concern

With

With innocence to live, with patience wait
Th' appointed hour ; too soon that hour will come
Tho' Nature run her course ; But Nature's God,
If need require, by thousand various ways,
Without thy aid, can shorten that short span,
And quench the lamp of life. — O when he comes
Rous'd by the cry of wickedness extreme
To Heav'n ascending from some guilty land
Now ripe for vengeance ; when he comes array'd
In all the terrors of Almighty wrath ;
Forth from his bosom plucks his ling'ring Arm,
And on the miscreants pours destruction down !
Who can abide his coming ? Who can bear
His whole displeasure ? In no common form
Death then appears, but starting into Size
Enormous, measures with gigantic stride
Th' astonish'd Earth, and from his looks throws round
Unutterable horror and dismay.
All Nature lends her aid. — Each Element
Arms in his cause. — Ope fly the doors of Heav'n,
The fountains of the deep their barriers break,
Above, below, the rival torrents pour,

And

And drown Creation, — or in the floods of fire
 Descends a livid cataract and consumes
 An impious race. — Sometimes when all seems peace,
 Wakes the grim Whirlwind, and with rude embrace
 Sweeps nations to their grave, or in the deep
 Whelms the proud wooden world; full many a youth
 Floats on his wat'ry bier, or lies unwept
 On some sad desert shore! — At dead of night
 In fullen silence stalks forth PESTILENCE :
 CONTAGION close behind taints all her steps
 With poys'nous dew; no smiting Hand is seen,
 No sound is heard; but soon her secret path
 Is mark'd with desolation; heaps on heaps
 Promiscuous drop: — No friend, no refuge near;
 All, all, is false and treacherous around,
 All that they touch, or taste, or breathe, is DEATH.

But ah! what means that ruinous roar? why fail
 These tott'ring feet? — Earth to its centre feels
 The Godhead's power, and trembling at his touch
 Through all its pillars, and in ev'ry pore,
 Hurls to the ground with one convulsive heave
 Precipitating domes, and towns, and tow'rs,

The work of ages. — Crush'd beneath the weight
Of gen'ral devaftation, millions find
One common grave; not ev'n a widow left
To wail her fons: the houfe, that fhould proteét,
Entombs its mafter, and the faithlefs plain,
If there he flies for help, with fudden yawn
Starts from beneath him.—Shield me, gracious Heav'n,
O fnatch me from deftruction! If this Globe,
This folid Globe, which thine own hand hath made
So firm and fure, if this my fteps betray;
If my own mother Earth from whence I fprung
Rife up with rage unnatural to devour
Her wretched offspring, whither fhall I fly?
Where look for fuccour? Where, but up to thee
Almighty Father? Save, O fave thy fuppliant
From Horrors fuch as thefe! — At thy good time
Let Death approach; I reck not — let him but come
In genuine form, not with thy vengeance arm'd,
Too much for Man to bear. — O rather lend
Thy kindly aid to mitigate his ftroke,
And at that hour when all aghaft I ftand,
(A trembling Candidate for thy compaffion,)

On this World's brink, and look into the next ;
When my Soul starting from the dark unknown
Casts back a wishful look, and fondly clings
To her frail prop, unwilling to be wrench'd
From this fair scene, from all her custom'd joys,
And all the lovely relatives of life,
Then shed thy comforts o'er me; then put on
The gentlest of thy looks. — Let no dark Crimes
In all their hideous forms then starting up
Plant themselves round my couch in grim array,
And stab my bleeding heart with two-edg'd torture,
Sense of past guilt, and dread of future woe.
Far be the ghastly crew! And in their stead,
Let chearful Memory from her purest cells
Lead forth a goodly train of Virtues fair
Cherish'd in earliest youth, now paying back
With tenfold usury the pious care,
And pouring o'er my wounds the heav'nly balm
Of conscious innocence. — But chiefly, THOU,
Whom soft-ey'd Pity once led down from Heav'n
To bleed for Man, to teach him how to live,
And, Oh! still harder lesson! how to die,

Disdain not Thou to smooth the restless bed
Of Sickness and of Pain. — Forgive the tear
That feeble Nature drops, calm all her fears,
Wake all her hopes, and animate her faith,
Till my rapt Soul anticipating Heav'n
Bursts from the thralldom of incumbering clay,
And on the wing of Extasy upborn
Springs into Liberty, and Light, and Life.

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